

REVIEW OF *SIDE BY SIDE INTERACTIVE*

Title	Side by Side – Interactive CD-ROM, levels 1 and 2
Platform	Windows® 98, ME, 2000, XP Mac OS® 9.1 or later (Classic mode, not Mac OS X)
Minimum hardware requirements	200mhz processor, minimum 64 MB of RAM (128 recommended) 400 MB available on hard disk space 800 x 600, 16-bit color display (minimum) 1024 x 768 recommended Sound Card (PC) Speakers or headphones Microphone CD-ROM Drive (12x or faster)
Software requirements	QuickTime version 5.0 or later (included on the CD-ROM)
Publisher	Steven J. Molinsky and Bill Bliss. New York: Pearson Longman; Website: http://www.longman.com/ae/multimedia/programs/SbS.htm
Support offered	(1) Website: http://www.longman.com/ae/multimedia/servsupport.htm (2) E-mail: http://www.longman.com/contactus.html (4) 877-202-4572
Target language	English
Target audience	Beginner, High Beginner (level 1) and Intermediate (level 2); young adult or adult ESL learner
Price	US \$209.00 (List Price)
ISBN	ISBN 0-13-048477-6 (Interactive CD-ROM, Level 1) ISBN 0-13-048470-9 (Interactive CD-ROM, Level 2)

Review by Larry Statan, [Contra Costa College](#)

Side by Side Interactive is one of an array of offerings that have sprung from the original source, the now decades old *Side by Side* textbook. *Side by Side Interactive* owes its structure and most of its content to an earlier video-based product, *Side by Side TV*, based on the textbook. Not coincidentally then, the computer-based program has the same fifty two units and the same thirteen segment division as the video cassettes. In other words, *Side by Side* brought about *Side by Side TV*, which in turn resulted in *Side by Side Interactive*. All of these products have several workbooks associated with them, which results in a large, but also somewhat confusing, family of choices.

Four CDs make up the *Side by Side Interactive* program: two for level 1, beginning to high-beginning, and two for level 2, intermediate, with each disk containing thirteen segments for 52 units, or segments. This does not reflect the number of units, however, in the original text. Each of the four CDs is organized in the same way. The initial screen displays the thirteen segments for that CD arranged vertically on the screen. Rolling the cursor over any of the segment buttons reveals the theme for that unit. For example, the topics on the first disk include *Personal Information*, *Daily Activities*, *Clothing*, and *Weather*. Each unit also includes a grammar point, ranging from using *To Be* in the first segment to *Reflexive Pronouns* and *Future Continuous Tense* in later segments on the last disk of level 2, thus reflecting an essentially structural organizing principle across the CDs and levels.

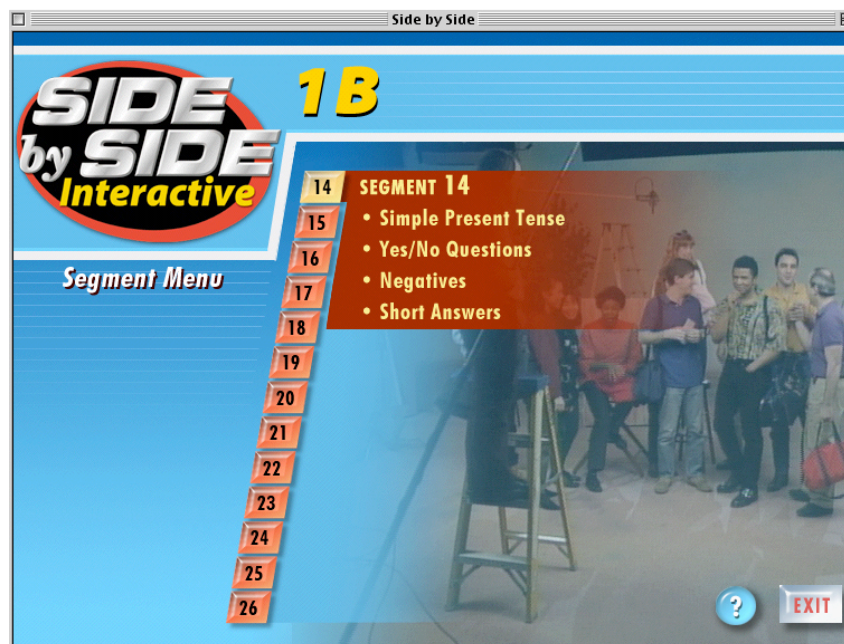


Figure 1. *Side by Side Interactive* typical segment menu

Clicking on any button on the Segments Menu accesses a further layer, displaying between six and ten lessons for a given segment (see sample screen in Figure 2.). Clicking on a lesson button reveals the activities associated with that lesson, for example, *Mixed Up Scene*; *What's the Order?*; *What's the Word?*; and *Complete the Conversations*. Throughout the program, each lesson, except for the Check-Up Tests, consists of two to five *Activities*, with cloze, true/false, multiple choice, or sequencing exercises, and with video activities sprinkled throughout. The four CDs offer students a sizeable amount of language work.



Figure 2. Lesson 14 typical lesson menu

A *Segments* button at the bottom of all screens makes it easy to return to the *Segment Menu* at any time. In fact, users can always access the level above via buttons at the bottom of the screen. This navigation aspect of the program is excellent and keeps students from getting lost. Also, a question mark icon in the lower right hand corner of each screen provides text help in Spanish, Mandarin, and Vietnamese. For teachers, the one indispensable text for using the software is the *Side by Side Interactive User's Guide*. This guide has tear-out pages listing all the segments, lessons, and activities for all parts of the program. These can be photocopied and distributed to students, and the copies provide a convenient checklist and overview that are not included in the software.


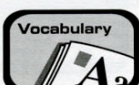

SIDE BY SIDE INTERACTIVE Level 1		SEGMENT 4
Name _____ ID# _____ Date _____		
SEGMENT 4 Daily Activities • Present Continuous Tense		
4.1 What Are You Doing? _____ 1: Match the Pictures & Words _____ 2: What's the Answer? _____ 4.2 Where's Charlie? —GrammarRap _____ 1: Watch & Complete _____ 2: Complete the GrammarRap _____ 4.3 What's Everybody Doing? _____ 1: Watch & Decide _____ 2: What's the Word? _____ 3: Which Word? _____ 4.4 Where's Betty?—GrammarRap _____ 1: Watch & Complete _____ 2: Complete the GrammarRap _____ 4.5 SBS-TV News _____ 1: Mixed-Up Scene! _____ 2: Do You Remember? _____ 3: Which Word? _____ 4: Scrambled Sentences _____ 4.6 Where Are Mom and Dad? —GrammarRap _____ 1: Watch & Complete _____ 2: Complete the GrammarRap _____	4.7 GrammarToon & Games _____ 1: GrammarToon _____ 2: GrammarToon Activity _____ 3: Flash Card Game _____ 4: Memory Game _____ 4.8 Check-Up Test Score: _____ 4.9 Writing _____ 1: Watch & Write _____ 2: Write the Answer _____ 3: Write About It! _____ 4.10 LIFESKILLS LESSON Common Activities _____ 1: Match the Activities _____ 2: What Are They Doing? _____ 3: Common Activities _____ 4: Answering Questions About Activities _____	
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: flex-end;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Workbook Side by Side Interactive Activity Workbook 1A pages 25–36</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Vocabulary Word by Word Basic pages 8–11 Basic Beginning Workbook pages 6–7</p> </div> </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: flex-end; margin-top: 10px;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Grammar & Conversation Side by Side Student Book 1 pages 17–26</p> </div> </div>		

Figure 3. A sample page from *Side by Side Interactive User's Guide*

Side by Side Interactive consists of numerous videos that include an array of situations, from a classroom setting to interviews on the street. Video in an interactive computer program provides a potent combination of images linked to voice and sound. A language learner can often guess the meaning of interactions in the target language from visual cues linked to the voice that accompanies each scene. According to Canning (2000), interactive language learning using video, CD ROM, and computers allows learners the ability to view and actively participate in lessons at their desired pace. Canning also recommends that teachers encourage the use of instructional video in the language classroom as it enables them to monitor and alternate instruction by fostering greater mental effort for active learning instead of passive retrieval of visual and auditory information.

The usefulness of CD-based video is enhanced if designers have provided an unambiguous way for users to manipulate video files. Indeed, the programmers and designers of *Side by Side Interactive* created an interface that is the best aspect of this product. The user can play the entire video, play one line, play the previous or next line, use a slider to access any part of the video, raise/lower the volume, record his or her own voice, listen, and compare the recording to the voice on the video. This is an important advantage over using a videocassette where pausing, rewinding, and playing a tape is usually imprecise, slow, and frustrating. *Side by Side Interactive's* digitized version with its excellent set of transport controls is orders of magnitude better than the cassette method. Students using the CD can quickly play, replay, find, or pause any section of the file. In addition, a Script area to the right of the video window defaults to the hidden mode, but can be easily opened to reveal the script that automatically scrolls when the video is running. Clicking any line of text plays that segment of the video, which helps learners by providing immediate access to any part of that video's script that learners have trouble following or in which they may have noticed a particular lexical item or grammar structure. One suggestion is that the text window be bigger as there is plenty of open space on the screen under the text area; the relatively close quarters for the text make the scrolling words jump around more than necessary while the video is running, which might be confusing for some learners.

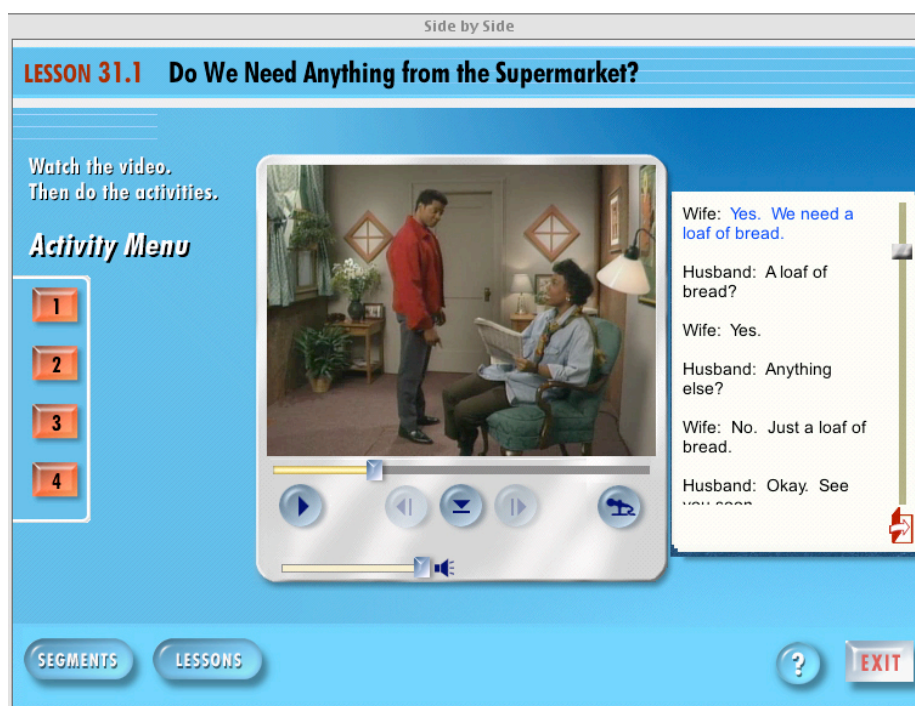


Figure 4. Activity menu for video showing the video controller

While the video controller is commendable, the quality of some of the videos might be improved. Some aspects of the decisions made in creating various video segments seem questionable. For example, in the very first scene learners watch a class learning how to say their names. One character says, "My name is Maria," as well as a string of other basic information. She says it so perfectly that it is clear that she is a native speaker of English; even students at a beginning level class can benefit from listening to realistic speech with an accent. This observation opens up questions about authenticity, credibility, and age-appropriateness of many videos in the program.

Additionally, the video sets suffer from inauthentic design features. For example, in a hospital scene the room in fact looks like the classroom from the very first scene despite the fact that it features a bed, a patient, and a nurse. The bed is narrow and looks like an aluminum chaise lounge covered with a blanket; there are no monitoring machines, no call button, in fact nothing to suggest a hospital room at all apart from the patient and nurse. In another segment, a scene unfolds in a restaurant kitchen, and again, it is the classroom/hospital room set, this time with a table, some food, and kitchen equipment. The videos continue in this vein with cardboard cars, stuffed dogs, and a variety of other unreal props. It is not hard to find actual classrooms, hospital rooms, and restaurants to tape in. The decision to videotape the segments on a sound stage gives much of *Side by Side Interactive* an inauthentic and out-dated look. The actors are used over and over again in different roles, and many of the sets are unrealistic and recycled, with the effect that the videos undermine authenticity and distance users from the message. This is a real detriment to the content and teaching purpose of the videos.

In addition to the video segments, *Side by Side Interactive* presents *Grammar Rap* video lessons. These use music, song, and movement to emphasize the rhythm and intonation patterns of English (authored by Carolyn Graham, *Grammar Rap* lessons are reminiscent of her well-known *Jazz Chants* (Graham, 1978)) and give the impression that they were taped with a very young audience in mind. For example, the segment *Where's Charlie* depicts two young men, one African American and one Caucasian, singing to Charlie regarding his whereabouts. The two singers are dressed in multi-colored capes and sing and move in a way that is suggestive of popular television programs aimed at pre-school learners. Materials designers whose targeted learners are composed of young adults and adults risk alienating their audience if the materials are not age-appropriate. ESL students are savvy and know the difference between real rap and a diluted version. Authenticity would make the program more credible, digestible, and accessible to users. Having real rappers with attitudes and using production techniques actually used in TV videos (e.g., MTV and VH-1) would draw learners in and enhance their attitude toward learning English. In some of the later *Grammar Rap* lessons, such as *Shopping*, the actors are more believable and the content of their interchange is more sophisticated, but the quality of these musical sections is inconsistent.

Despite some authenticity shortcomings, the videos are the heart of *Side by Side Interactive*. In fact, the entire program utilizes over 950 video files, many of which are found in activities, therefore accounting for the large number of files. Some of the activities involve sequencing tasks, such as *Mixed Up Scene*, where users watch and listen to small video clips, then drag them on the screen with the help of the mouse to the correct sequence. These activities are engaging and use the computer's capabilities well.

It is surprising, however, that the only spoken English is video-based. In other words, if students are not watching a video on the screen, they hear no spoken English on the CD. For example, in a drag-and-drop cloze exercise, the learner drags the word *address* to the sentence *My _____ is 21 Pine Street*, and a pleasant "ding" sounds, but the learner does not hear the sentence. Hearing the text spoken, especially after the user has successfully completed an activity that reconstructs the text, has come to be expected in CALL programs today. It provides an additional level of reward and confirmation to learners that their choices were correct, as well as another opportunity for the software to offer modeling. Perhaps the videos require substantial space on the CD, leaving little room for sound files. Eliminating a few videos might have allowed the program designers to exploit every screen and use the power of the computer in even simple exercises.

The *Writing Lessons*, contained in every segment, provide examples of activities that would benefit from a little more development, especially *Watch and Write*, essentially a dictation exercise. In this activity, users play a short video containing just one sentence (for example, "We ate some ice cream," from Segment 26, Lesson 6), then type what they have heard into a text box, and click on the "check work" icon. The correctly typed answer appears in a second text box. However, if the user types gibberish, i.e. an incorrect sentence, into the first text box, the program nevertheless accepts it without comment, thus leaving the learner without any explicit corrective feedback. The programming required to actually check the user's input is not complicated but does not exist here and may thus give learners a false sense of language mastery. In addition, the non-video activities in the software often feel like traditional cloze or multiple choice templates filled with the unit's content, potentially yielding the impression that the program and the exercises were done on an assembly line.

Other features of *Side by Side Interactive* include *Games*, *Grammar Toons*, and *Lifeskills Lessons*. The *Games* are engaging and particularly focus on associative and decoding skills, especially in the *Memory Game* and the *Crossword Puzzle*. In the basic version of the game, learners match related items. In more challenging *Memory Games*, users must complete sentences by locating the last section of the sentence. The *Grammar Toons* segments lean heavily on animated grammar items fitting into bright grids on the screen. For example, learners see singular and plural subject pronouns racing across the screen to find their place on a grammar grid; then learners move on to an exercise, usually a cloze, that tests what they have learned from the animation. While these animations are entertaining and appeal to visual learners, they are not interactive, and the information they contain could also be learned from a table. The computer's capabilities could have been exploited by designing the task in a way that has the learner drag grammar items to their place in the grid.

For several years now, there has been a trend to make ESL materials more sensitive to issues that address **success in the workplace, community, and family, particularly materials geared toward adult ESL learners**. These skills are outlined in the **Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) guidelines**¹. The *Lifeskills* lessons in *Side by Side Interactive* correlate directly with many CASAS goals. However, the *Lifeskills Lessons* are used in isolation in the software, without supplementary material; consequently, the content is too minimal to offer much instruction. Additionally, without outside sources, students often cannot answer questions presented in these sections. For example, the activities in the *Civics Lesson* contain items such as *A senator's term is ____ years* with two answer choices. The answer, however, is neither in the video, nor in the workbook. In another example, *Medical Appointments and Common Ailments/Symptoms*, one exercise consists of a list of scrambled words arranged on the left side of the screen. Unscrambling and typing, for instance, "nose" does, however, not reveal a graphic of a nose in the large unused white space on the screen, nor is the word "nose" spoken. The remainder of the activities involve connecting graphics of suffering people to the unscrambled name of the ailment they have. Again, the exercises do not use the full potential of the computer, which could have been achieved by showing a graphic of the body that highlights the items being tested. Additionally, this important topic is preceded by several short videos on diet, including one in which a woman is concerned that her poodle, a stuffed animal in the video, is getting too "fat," a word that she does not want the dog to hear. This medical theme is important, but this lesson treats it too lightly for the program's audience.

All 52 segments across the four CDs also contain a grammar point related to the topic of each lesson. The publisher claims that the software is a stand-alone product and students do not need the *Side by Side* workbooks or supplemental material to use the program, yet without extra information or instruction, the grammar presented in the software often does not adequately address the point for that segment. For example, when dealing with the grammar point of count/non-count nouns, the software provides several traditional count/non-count related activities attached to the videos on diets, rounded out by *Grammar Toon* activities. However, nowhere does the user *discover* crucial aspects about count/non-count nouns

and corresponding article choices (cf. Biesenbach-Lucas, Chechueva, Weidner, & Yancey, 2005; and Biesenbach-Lucas, Couper, & Woerner, 2005, for benefits of inductive discovery approaches to teaching and learning grammar), get an explanation of using *much* or *many*, see an example of quantifiers such as *two quarts of oil*, or learn why their choices in the activities should be used with *less* or *fewer*. This implicit grammar approach is reminiscent of the approach in the *Side by Side* textbooks. Common non-count words of interest to students, such as *homework*, *information*, and *knowledge* are not presented either. By the same token, the *Grammar Toon* screen does show using *fish* with *less*, but does not show it used with *fewer*, which is a possible construction.

In conclusion, from the point of view of a software designer, this reviewer has some reservations about some of the decisions made in the production of the product. These can be summarized as follows: first, many of the videos look dated and hardly credible due to poor sets and a sometimes more youth than adult appropriate look and tone of the videos. It would be useful for *Side by Side Interactive* designers to improve on production values and for the videos to offer a core, or central, metaphor that holds the whole series together, allowing users a sense of connection to the program's content. Additionally, the many non-video activities included present rather traditional, often mechanical, exercises and suffer from lack of sound files attached to them. In addition, the idea that the software is a stand-alone product is hard to understand considering the lack of source material available on the CDs; frequently, users must answer questions with no previous exposure to the material being tested.

Overall though, *Side by Side Interactive* is an ambitious and jam-packed software program that features hundreds of videos presented in an excellent controller that makes the videos easy to use. Undoubtedly, English language learners at the beginning and low-intermediate level can benefit from exposure to *Side by Side Interactive*, especially with respect to the quantity of material available on the software and its excellent layout and controls. The publisher's representatives report that the software has been enthusiastically received, and this is most likely due to the long list of good qualities that *Side by Side Interactive* offers: an enormous amount of content and activities that provide users weeks of work; video screens and controls that allow even non-tech-savvy users to interact with the videos in a remarkable way; videos and activities that demonstrate creativity and clever design that facilitate learning; and the software's stability and navigation, which are first rate. It can be hoped that the next generation of *Side by Side Interactive* will dazzle users with its boldness and creativity.

NOTES

1. See <http://www.casas.org/> for details on the CASAS guidelines.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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